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ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt to continue the reflective element that was a part of a dissertation based on a study of the development of a culturally relevant curriculum in a tribal school. As a reflective retrospection on the anthropological research methodology, it examines the intersection of academic research traditions, the traditions of the Ojibwe people who were the subject of the research, and the personal traditions of the researcher, herself a Native American. The work of many American Indian scholars leads to the concept of a Native American-oriented, or First Nations, ethic for research, in which research emphasis shifts from research for the sake of the study to research for the sake of the community in which it is situated. The exploitative role of the anthropologist has long been criticized, and it was a particular concern for the researcher to be identified within the research project as other than an all-knowing expert. Reciprocity and mutual respect were intended to be an integral part of the research approach. The dissertation then grew from being a part of discussions to taking action with community members. (Contains 36 references.) (SLD)

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Research Methods as a Situated Response: Towards a First Nations' Methodology

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February 26, 1997

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I. INTRODUCTION

> *Looking back at my dissertation, now a full year after it is all said and done, I am still trying to sort out exactly where the "methods" are. It reminds me of the split I identified in my research as stifling: the content/methods split in educational practice. Why would I dissect what I teach from how I teach it? Why would a worksheet on ricing replace going ricing? When only content is implicated in curriculum, the question of culturally relevant curriculum becomes severely limited. It is as if the way you have done something (e.g. teach or research) should be extracted from what you did or, for that matter, why you did it. So that it can be replicated? or mass produced? These categories do not make sense to me. And so I write this article, this "piece," or slice of my research, with methods as a focus, but, moreover, to complicate through example how much the "way" of doing research was inextricable from the research and its context and cultural locations.* [1]

My intention in going to the Lac Courte Orielles Ojibwe reservation was not to do research. Being of mixed heritage (Lakota, Chinese and White), I had many personal as well as professional reasons for wanting to "go back" to the reservation. *(Going back means touching a place of the past and the future that belongs to all of us detribalized, adopted out, colonized and made-not-to-feel-at-home people. 'Going back' means remembering to touch the places that bring us together. 'Going back' means I am not from there, the way someone raised there is, means I will never be a part of that community in that same way, but it also means no better and no worse.)*

I originally went to student teach, then to teach, then to stay, and in the process of all this, wrote a dissertation. This article is an attempt to continue

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[1] The writing in italics is used to demarcate an "insider" voice, one which calls on ***epistemic privilege*** to validate ideas, and considers emotions and "all the details of the ways in which [their]oppression is experienced, " to be an essential way in which knowledge is constructed. (Narayan, 1988, p. 36). Bound in concrete examples, these thoughts are often theoretically laden. Some of these are taken from the time of writing the dissertation, some are more recent.

the reflective element that was so much a part of the original work. It is a reflective retrospection on my methodology. The ways in which I did the research, the "methods," were not clearly delineated before I started the work. Instead, the goal of exploring a problem which was relevant to the community, in a way which was responsive to that particular context, guided my work. Now, a year after the entire dissertation process is done, and situated away from the community, I believe the "methods" still refuse a single category or any other formula which may make them a recipe for research. What I can do more comfortably is point to academic research traditions and Ojibwe traditions, which I believe were influential. Being a Native person, of mixed racial and cultural heritage, I cannot so easily point to what of my own thinking and ways of knowing comes from where. At this point, I believe a more salient task is to articulate the struggles.

II. PROBLEMS WITH RESEARCH

Addressing exploitative research methods in Indian Country

Gleaned from readings by Native scholars, (see LaFromboise, 1987, for example) as well as through the oral traditions of the Indian "community" (meaning the grape vine, the oral tradition of Indian Country), there seems to be a growing Native-oriented, or First Nations,[2] ethic for doing research in our own, Native American communities (Christenson, personal communication, National Indian Education Association, 1994).[3] My sense of this "ethic" is that the emphasis shifts from "research for research's sake" (or perhaps for the sake of "knowledge in the abstract") to research which serves some specific purpose or need of the community with in which it is situated.

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[2] I was introduced to this term through the Canadian Journal of Native Education. It is a term more often used in Canada to refer to indigenous peoples, but I use it here since I credit many of those First Nations writings with ideas inspirational to this paper.

[3] Just after this research project was completed, Native research was the topic of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium's president's retreat. Papers delivered there will appear in the *Tribal College Journal*, Summer 1997.

I believe this ethic is at least in part a response to the historical circumstances of being colonized. Specifically, I understand some articulated ethic by Native peoples as resistant to the dynamic of exploitation being replicated under the guise of "research." Narayan writes about the clearly defined roles of "self" (anthropologist) and "other" (Native) as an implicit part of the historical context of anthropology—a paradigm which cannot accommodate the "Native anthropologist" (1993). The exploitative role of anthropologist within Native communities has long been critiqued and at times undermined by Native peoples through oral traditions as well as written ones (see Deloria, 1969; LaFromboise, 1983; and Maynard, 1974; for example).

Situating Myself within the Research.....A Not-God Trick

> The war is not between Indian and White, but between that which honors life and that which does not. It is fought within ourselves as well as within the world (Hampton, 1991, p. 296).

> *What is the purpose for doing a dissertation project anyway? To get a Ph.D.? to get a job at a college? How about to take the time out to put thoughts with experiences and voices of community people and do some foundation work for cultural curriculum development that includes community building, as part of the vision, part of the process, a part of the way the school changes and becomes a community-cultural center. That's my vision.*

Situating myself within the research project, as well as the text, as *not* the all-knowing expert was an important goal for me. Within the written text this meant not assuming a invisible or universal voice - hence the importance of the reflective quotes. On the ground, I tryed not to make sweeping generalizations about Indian education, nor to assume that I could speak for the entire community. This would be untrue to my experience and antithetical to the idea of community building as I understand it.

> *What it's like to suddenly become "Auntie" to 300 kids and know that in three years I'll have to write something about them, something which does not betray that trust and relationship.... What it's like to be a "mixed blood" in*

1995 and in every community I live in feel that that is either "exotic" or somewhat looked down on (I heard a song about a HALF BREED on the radio just today), not quite "authentic," never quite completely respected..... And then what it's like to work at a tribal school where the real, the earth-shaking work is all about identity; finding a space and a place for yourself in the fast changing world without getting caught in the crossfire of tribal politics. What it's like to try ever so hard to fully, intelligently comprehend all this, while still maintaining the freedom and dignity to laugh, cry, sometimes not understand —and feel it all.

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III. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

When I started to limit "my" research problem to the very most narrow definition, I realized the burning question (Haig- Brown, 1990) was the question I took from the community: how to develop a curriculum which was relevant to Ojibwe culture within the confines of a tribal school. Twenty years ago when Native students walked out of the public school in Hayward, Wisconsin, discriminated against but not beaten, this was the same question they carried with them. Revisiting this question, I began to see ways in which my research could act as an intervention, not simply a documentation of a problem that was well known.

So, for example, I knew traditionally Elders were the teachers, the historians, the storytellers. I wanted to ask them their advise, but beyond that, I wanted to help build a bridge for them back to the school, where they could once again be instituted in that place of honor called "teacher." Instead of simply interveiwing Elders, one of the projects I took on was to work with other community members in establishing an active Elders Council for the school.

IV MORE EXAMPLES, AND HOW THESE WORK TOWARDS A FIRST NATIONS METHODOLOGY.....

Contradicting the history of being exploited by research processes was a starting point for my methodology: Relationships of reciprocity replace

relationships of exploitation. Here I draw from Carl Urion's (1990) idea of a First Nation's discourse of learning. Most importantly, I tryed to emulate the idea of reciprocity and mutual respect in my research methodology. This meant that the people I "interviewed" or gathered stories from were people I was involved in an on-going, two-way, exchange with. They were people I had some kind of relationship with before the formal "interview." Also, interviews drew on a common interest (the school, and the children) and were intended to strengthen existing relationships not to create a new or "artificial" relationship solely for the purpose of RESEARCH.

> *I am thinking of the time I went to "interview" Lucy. She was quite happy to have me visiting, but when I started to ask her "What should be taught at the school?" she told me that in the past three years of working with the Elders I had been asking that question. The question was not new, and I had already been given the answers, in so many different ways. We spent our time sipping coffee and I listened to other stories that day. I was a little surprised, and somewhat delighted. It made me feel as if I had been doing , and asking , what I had wanted to all along, and that that was understood.*

The relationships, of reciprocity and respect, ordered the methods. This made my research a "process" which cannot be replicated but which is situated within the particular relationships among myself and other community members.

> *In my interactions with the Elders I would ask a direct question about the meaning of culture-based curriculum or curriculum for the La Courte Orielles Schools, for example, and oftentimes the response I got was not an "answer" but rather a story about the boarding schools. This is how the chapter on boarding schools came about. I interpreted their stories to my questions as a way of telling me that the boarding school stories were an important piece of the puzzle of curriculum and schooling at the tribal school today.*

I was concerned with researching a question which originated from the community, while also being acutely attuned to their responses. I wanted to know how these responses might be incorporated and again reorient the research process. After hearing a half dozen stories about boarding school

experiences, for examples, I began to ask for these stories in my interviews and ask myself how to organize the dissertation around them.

My writing came from a process of being a part of discussions, listening to stories, taking action within the community and reflecting back on practices. This all happened within the context of being a part of the community I was writing about. I believe that going back and forth between stories, practices and writings helped me to keep research grounded in the concerns of the community.

> *Maybe going back really means going back and forth, for me, for now. So publishing something on methods is not so much "selling out" as it is paving a way for other scholars/community members like myself. Feeling yet another version of a dualistic and fatalistic choice emerging—smart or pretty; Indian or raceless; scholar or community member—I rush to object! Isn't it time to evolve beyond impossible choices for women and people of color in the academy?*

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